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## History Has Its Eyes on You: Lighthouses and Libraries Weathering Storms of Change

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# History Has Its Eyes on You: Lighthouses and Libraries Weathering Storms of Change

Corey Seeman, University of Michigan

## Abstract

For hundreds of years, the United States has been protected by two venerable institutions. Lighthouses have served as a beacon on the shores to guide ships carrying both people and cargo to a safe harbor. Libraries have served as a beacon to guide people to books, magazines, journals, reference works, recordings, and other media for enlightenment, education, and enjoyment. Both lighthouses and libraries have enjoyed their status as “public goods” with little question in regard to the rationale for funding and support. Since most ships have navigation systems and we all have library items on our smartphones (we do, right?), questions are being asked about the future of these two beacons. Changes impacting both lighthouses and libraries are remarkably similar. With automation and electrification, lighthouses transitioned to low-maintenance entities and many have been turned into historical museums. Libraries have seen tremendous changes as collections became increasingly electronic over the past two years. The value proposition libraries play on campuses has changed—along with their ability to support community members in the present and many years in the future. While “what’s past is prologue” helps set the scene, the reality laid before both is to adapt or “wither away on the vine.” This presentation explored the parallel paths taken by both lighthouses and libraries in fulfilling their self-mandated missions. It also explored the meaning of a “public good” and the demands that librarians have in supporting both current use and future use of collections as we balance between community needs and aspirations. How librarians (and lighthouse keepers) face the coming storm will have a tremendous impact on future generations of our community members.

As I started working on this program, I wrote down two words—*empathy* and *change*. That is really what I think is critical as I view the future of the library and what might be our path forward. In exploring the grander issues that we are facing in libraries, it became clear that we needed to place it in a broader context. This presentation first came about as the keynote for the Great Lakes Resource Sharing Conference, whose theme was “Harnessing the Winds of Change” and whose symbol is a lighthouse. Now besides having a nautically themed name (though I think it was Americanized when my father’s family emigrated from Eastern Europe), I am a total lighthouse geek and, like many librarians I know, I was a history major back in my undergrad days. So I started thinking more about the concept of change and what parallel lessons might be pulled from lighthouses and libraries. This was a far more interesting way to explore the change that we went through (at my library—which was big) and showcase the way that all organizations change (for better or worse).

While I am going to jump into a preview of my talk, there are some opportunities to share some broader ideas right now about change and what that means. But the anchor here is empathy—a concept that we probably need to be talking about much more in libraries than we do. As individuals, librarians are

truly empathic and very service oriented—but taken collectively, we can be somewhat constrained and conservative in embracing the future. Just as Frederic tells his fellow pirates at the beginning of Gilbert and Sullivan’s epic *Pirates of Penzance*—“Individually, I love you all with affection unspeakable; but, collectively, I look upon you with a disgust that amounts to absolute detestation”—my goal as a speaker and writer is to get people to institutionally adopt some of the traits that we have as individuals. So, as we contemplate change *and* empathy, it is really important that we look both forward and backward to see where we have been and where we might be going.

This is a great time to explore the theme for this year’s Charleston Conference, “What’s Past Is Prologue.” This theme comes from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*—traditionally considered his last play and one that many have interpreted as a farewell to the stage. In thinking about this theme, we need to explore the past as a means for where we are today. We are a product (both as individuals and institutions) of where we have traveled and what we have done, the challenges we have faced and the opportunities that we have found ourselves able to take advantage of (as well as those we may have missed). The connections between the paths taken by those who tended the lighthouses and those who serve as

librarians have many parallels—and this presentation gave me an opportunity to explore that.

How did I conduct the research for this talk? Well, just like the students and faculty across higher education: mostly from my desk. I consulted e-journals, Library Literature, LISA (Library and Information Science Abstracts), Google Scholar, EconLit, PsycINFO, ABI Inform (ProQuest), and Business Source Complete. Most of my research was online—I only grabbed one or two print volumes. But in doing this research, I was able to live the lives of the community that we serve at our library. One of the best ways that we can show empathy with our users is by doing research—by presenting, by writing, by sharing. While our tenure systems are built on producing scholarship, in my opinion, a truly great benefit from doing this work is that we can make empathetic connections with our faculty, our students, and our community. If we are not doing research, it is difficult to make that connection.

Exploring the change that we lived through is interesting in its own right—but taken more broadly in a large context, we see far more opportunities and can draw more meaningful connections. Both fields (lighthouse keepers and libraries) have gone through tremendous changes and are at different stages. I doubt many people listening know a lighthouse keeper, though many know people who serve in the Coast Guard in the United States (or comparable entities in your world). Lighthouse keepers were doing a great job—yet the changes took place. The fundamental changes of the staffing of the United States Coast Guard and the Aids to Navigation Unit did not come about because of a lack of quality, but were a more technologically sophisticated way to manage keeping the light on. Such is the way of the librarians and our role in providing information resources for the communities that we serve both now and in the future.

So, this takes me to something I read not that long ago in the preface to a guide on business information:

Business has always been subject to uncertainties and change. It is affected by the elements, by wars, by mass movements, by changes in the wants and desires of consumers and by government regulation. Above all, competition tends continually to modify the business structure. New methods, new products and new processes introduce new elements that undermine the

supremacy of one industry or firm or even a whole system of doing business. And the trend toward increasing regulation of business by governmental bodies here and abroad must not be ignored. In short, one generalization that truly applies to all business is: Change is continuous and inevitable. (Coman, 1949)

While this could have been written anytime over the past few years, the origin was much, much older. The source of this quote was *Sources of Business Information* by Edwin T. Coman Jr. (1949). He was the director of the Graduate School of Business Library at Stanford University. In the preface of his work—which was cited by a guide that we printed at the business library here at Michigan around 1953 as a resource to guide students—Coman spells out the conundrum of business research. It sounds as good today as it did almost 70 years ago. To repeat, “Change is continuous and inevitable.” Furthermore, change is also beyond our control (for better or worse).

We aspire to study change management from the aspect of what we want to do. Maybe we draw from examples of shifting functions within a library to introduce new services or opportunities to our community. Maybe we explore change from the perspective of dealing with our increasingly electronic environment. But as I think about this situation, it is clear that change management is how we respond to changes that are beyond our control. How do we navigate our ship when the winds change directions or the gales blow us toward the rocks? How do we manage change when we lose staff or the ability to purchase resources? How do we manage change when we lose our long-established identity that is connected with a physical space?

That is the situation that happened to us at Kresge Library Services through a major construction project that ran from 2014 through 2016. We went from having around 27K square feet, room for 700 students and 70K volumes, to having around 5K square feet, room for around 20 students and 200 volumes. That is 200—a two and a zero and another zero.

Change management is not about controlling the future, but adapting to the conditions as they change. A lighthouse keeper would love to operate without storms. But is that really possible? Libraries need to manage not only the change they would like to see for themselves, but also the changes that are imposed on them. We cannot create a strategic plan for the library that is separate from that of our

institutional mission and goals. We are not charting our own adventure, but working to support the goals and needs of the institutions where we serve and operate.

Lighthouses are not plug and play—they are not one size fits all. Their height is based on the need to see them from the oceans, lakes, or waterways. If you are high up on a bluff, you can have a shorter building. Similarly, not every academic or public library should be a carbon copy of each other. We go to conferences to see what our colleagues are doing, but it is important to know this in the context of filling a particular need. Which takes us to the discussion of lighthouses as a public good.

Mid-19th-century economists like John Stuart Mill (in the *Principles of Political Economy*) stated: “it is a proper office of government to build and maintain lighthouses, establish buoys, etc. for the security of navigation: for since it is impossible that the ships at sea which are benefited by a lighthouse, should be made to pay a toll on the occasion of its use, no one would build lighthouses for motives of personal interest” (Coase, 1974). This was one of many instances where lighthouses were viewed as a public good and where government expenditures should be used for its upkeep. However, Coase argued that the British lighthouse system, managed by Trinity House, was in fact a private corporation and not the crown. By that notion, what might be a public good may not need to be managed as a central or government expense. The tradition in the United States, however, is that lighthouses and other aids to navigation were a government expense. In fact, the ninth law passed by Congress saw the placement of what would become the Lighthouse Service in Alexander Hamilton’s Department of the Treasury.

A key element in this discussion of whether something is a public good or a private good is non-excludability. As Blakeley, Lewis, and Mills stated in 2005, “in its purest form, non-excludability means that once a good has been created, it is impossible to prevent other people from gaining access to it (or more realistically, is extremely costly to do so).” Ships may pass a lighthouse and benefit from its warning about impending rocks, while never paying into the financial system that supports its maintenance. The same dynamic may exist for libraries, especially academic ones. These are large centralized expenditures on campuses and communities that are referenced as the “heart of the institution,” but they cannot grow unchecked. Libraries (as we all know) are under

the same pressures as any other aspect of campus life. We are dealing with space pressures, storage restrictions, budgetary restraints, and many more checks on the desire of our institutions to meet all the information needs of our campus.

The discussion about public good and change, especially when considering factors that are beyond your control, leads into a discussion about the parallels between changes that have taken place in lighthouses with changes that have taken place in libraries. These were identified as follows:

- Perception is reality—even though not everything is online, the perception is just that.
- Free rider problem—libraries and lighthouses are large centralized expenses that provide a public good, but fail to provide demonstrated value when certain accounting views are taken. This is also a problem of being a cost center for an institution.
- Different dynamics of building use—while lighthouses are beautiful and cannot be turned into much (save a nice B&B), libraries have great value as centrally adapted space for other purposes on college campuses.
- Imagery is important—but not critical. Should a library have books to connect with users or give them a sense that they are indeed in the library?
- Embracing the change—if change has not happened yet at your library, rest assured it will. If we can imagine the library world in 2037, we can imagine there will likely be very few, if any open stacks. Many libraries will forego having books at all. Space pressures on campuses will change the way that we operate.

When considering all these pressures and factors, it seems that the future of the library might find parallels in the history of lighthouses. It is not at all that we will see libraries turned into museums, but instead that we will have to operate in a world that is very different from what we are accustomed to. Which brings us back to empathy. The Kresge Library at Michigan did not close, but become virtually unrecognizable to anyone who knew it before. What did not change was our need to support and serve the campus where we operate. When it comes to change, one does not always choose a desired path,

but how you respond is important. With all that in mind, our focus became solely on how we may serve our users within our new world. We focused on reference services and support of the school's action-learning courses, which have been growing over the past 10 years. We focused on changing the value proposition of the library from a place to visit to a service to interact with. We even changed our name to Kresge Library Services to reflect this change.

Whether there is a silver lining or not in the changes that have taken place at our library—or at light-houses across the country—is not that important. What is important for our longevity as a profession and as a service is if there is a recognized value for the services and resources that we provide. Pining

for the good old days is neither helpful nor productive. When the school introduced the new building in the fall of 2016, they had a nice write-up about the library:

A completely re-thought Kresge Library Services, transitions from a collection of physical reference materials to a full suite of information resources and research services, guided by expert staff. (Ross Dividend, *Ross Alumni Magazine*, fall 2016)

It is not what you remembered. It was not what it was. But it is still relevant and important to the school's research and curricular mission. And at the end of the day, that works.

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